

In the blink of an eye, a crash can change everything. Here are some experiences teens had with—and without—safety belts.

Teen crash stories make buckle-up message click



A NEW BALL GAME

Tammy Wilber was the co-captain of the soccer team. The summer before her senior year of high school, she and three teammates were heading for soccer camp, cruising down a New Hampshire highway at 80 miles an hour on a sunny day. A bee started buzzing around inside the car, and a girl who was allergic to bee stings started screaming. Tammy was startled, drove off the road and then jerked the wheel to get the car back on the road. She lost control of the car. It flipped three times in the median.

No one was wearing a safety belt.

Tammy was ejected from the car. Her spinal cord was severed. At 17, she was paralyzed. "I'm in a wheelchair now because I didn't wear a safety belt," Tammy says.

The physical challenges Tammy faced were obvious: "I had to learn how to do everything from a wheelchair: taking a shower, getting dressed, doing the dishes. The recovery process was long and difficult."

Less obvious were the emotional challenges. "Imagine being 17 and having your future ripped out from under you," she says. "It was difficult

being so young and realizing that I wouldn't play soccer anymore, that I had to give up my goal of becoming a nurse. I had to change my perspective of my future."

Now Tammy shares her story with students, telling them to buckle up every time they are in a car. "I tell them that I was them—I was 17. You're not invincible. This could happen to anybody," she says. "Buckle up. Life's too short to have to push yourself around in a wheelchair."

Tammy Wilber is a program coordinator for Think First of Washington, which works to reduce head and spinal injuries. She can be reached at think1st@u.washington.edu.

SIXTEEN AND STRAPPED IN



Sixteen was hardly sweet for actress and singer Cee Cee Michaela, who played Yvonne on the UPN series "Girlfriends." At 16, while driving to school, she fell asleep at the wheel of her car. Miraculously, the car stopped right before going

over an embankment. That same year, her car went out of control and slammed into a telephone pole, splitting the car in two. As ambulance workers approached, she crawled out of a car window without a scratch.

Both times, she was wearing a safety belt.

"Thank God for grace and mercy and safety belts!" she says. Now, whenever she can, she testifies about the need for safety belts, particularly in the African American community.

Cee Cee Michaela has contact information on her web site: www.ceeceemichaela.com.

REMEMBERING CODY

Cody Brown, a 16-year-old student at Tate High School in Pensacola, Fla., was riding home from school with some classmates when the driver lost control and crashed into the woods. Two students who were belted in were only slightly injured. But Cody, who wasn't wearing a safety belt, was thrown from the car. He suffered severe head and spinal injuries, went into a coma and was placed on life support.

Two nights later, Cody's family was told that he wouldn't recover. The next morning, Cody was taken off the respirator. Cody's father, Charles Brown, made a plea to Cody's friends: Wear your safety belts for the

You do the math

69%

Safety belt use by
16- to 24-year-olds

Source: NHTSA, National Occupant Protection Use Survey, June 2002

7,563

Number of 16- to 20-
year-old passenger
vehicle occupants killed
or seriously injured in
crashes in 2001

63%

Percentage who weren't
wearing a safety belt

Source: The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's 2001 Fatality Analysis Reporting System—Annual Report File (ARF). The statistics used covered 16- to 20-year-old passenger vehicle occupants who were killed or incapacitated in fatal motor vehicle crashes in the 50 States and the District of Columbia in 2001. The statistics include only persons where restraint use was known.

14.1%

Percentage of high
school students who
rarely or never wore
safety belts as a
passenger

Source: Center for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Survey—United States, 2001

next three weeks, he urged, saying that if they could do it for that long, it would become automatic.

Cody's friends decided to turn their grief into a mission. They organized a safety belt awareness campaign for the school called Buckle Up for Cody Week. The campaign included rallies, T-shirt and bumper sticker giveaways and daily news coverage and public service announcements on the school's television and radio stations. Students dressed as crash-test dummies and joined sheriff's deputies at school parking lot checkpoints to issue mock citations to student drivers and passengers who weren't wearing safety belts.

And they issued Cody's father's challenge to the entire student body, asking Tate students to sign pledges that they would wear their safety belt for three weeks.

The Buckle Up for Cody campaign also inspired several other area schools to organize their own safety belt campaigns.

"The campaign will continue to have an effect," said Candice Gibson, a teacher at Tate. "Every time someone wears a Buckle Up for Cody T-shirt, you can't help but stop and think about it." ●